

Devotion to the Church: The Discalced Carmelite's Mission

St. Teresa ended her life saying, "I am a daughter of the Church." The Second Vatican Council has defined the Church in a new way in teaching us that "the Church is the People of God, made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." Carmel's devotion to the Church, therefore, needs to be thought through anew in the light of this new teaching which we find in the central document of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*. (the Church as the Light of the World, n. 1).

Let us begin to deepen our understanding of the Church by recalling what Jesus taught us about the nature and life of the Church in St. John's Gospel. It is in chapters 13-21 that John tells us how the Church took birth in the paschal mystery of the Lord. Our prayer-life, our knowledge of God (Jn. 17:3), is our growth in the paschal mystery. Chapter 13 is the story of Christ's service and teaching to the Apostles after the Last Supper. Chapter 14 is an introduction to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the new paraclete. Chapter 15, on the vine and the branches, is Christ's own parable on the kind of life, the kind of love, and the kind of friendliness that will be the single outstanding mark of His followers in the new people of God. Chapter 16 is a fuller understanding of the role of the Spirit as guide and witness to the members of the Church, and to the world at large, when Christ will have left the scene. Chapter 17 is Jesus' priestly prayer for the unity of the Church, and then 18 and 19 are the story of His supreme "hour" when He established the Church in His blood, shed for us in redeeming us all from the powers of evil, of Satan, of division, and of manipulation by the likes of Pilate and the high priests of the Jews. Chapter 20 is the story of the return of Jesus after His resurrection, in glory and in the power of the Holy Spirit, to forgive sins, to revive faith and hope, and to tell the whole world, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" -the last beatitude of Christ. Chapter 21 is an addition, after the death of John, about leadership in the Church. Let us take the salient points of this doctrine on the Church.

The Church in the Paschal Mystery of Christ

- I Jesus identified Himself with His church community (Jn. 15: 1-6). What brings the church communities into being is His paschal mystery:
 - 1) in Baptism, those bathed in His mystery inherit eternal life;
 - 2) His greatest gift to His Church is the divine indwelling;
 - 3) His faithful disciples will enjoy an intimate awareness of the presence of Jesus;
 - 4) and enjoy the fullness of union in the vision of God;
 - 5) the primary duty of the disciple is to love as Jesus loved, i.e. in obedience to the Father, even unto death.
- II Disciples "bear fruit" by loving one another and drawing others into this love. (Jn. 15:7-25)

- 1) To be persecuted for Christ's sake is to share in His passion and its mysterious knowledge. "The purest understanding follows the purest suffering" (St. John of the Cross).
- 2) The faith of Jesus gathers together warm affection, loyal justice, humble service and contemplative insight into that love of the Father which is deeper than all its expressions.
- 3) The love of Jesus Christ is the motive power of discipleship.

III The Paraclete is one with us, so He can be of assistance to us (Jn. 14:15-18, 26; 15:26-16:33). The Spirit of Jesus is the spirit of both contemplative prayer and community relationships; indeed, the Holy Spirit is the subsistent relationship of the Father and the Son (St. Thomas Aquinas). He is the bond uniting us to Christ and one another. Therefore,

- 1) Everything which is said of the Spirit is said also of Jesus.
- 2) The Spirit is to be everything to the disciples after the Ascension that Christ was to them before.
- 3) When the Church is disturbed from within, the Spirit acts as a guide; as in the time of Teresa, so also in our own time.
- 4) When the Church is persecuted from without, the Spirit acts as the Witness to: the justice of Christ's claims and the injustice of the world's, through the persecuted members of Christ (Stephen, witnessing to Saul); the sin of *unbelief*, which is sin par excellence in John; the victory of justice, the judgment of the world by Christ, conquering the prince of this world; the power of the justice of God, stronger than death, harder than hell, and a bond of unity springing from the strong unity of the Father and the Son (Jn. 17).
- 5) The Holy Spirit also guides the Church as we probe the deeper meaning of Christ's teaching.

IV The prayer of Jesus (Jn. 17) is the model of prayer for, with, and in the Church. "It is the most extraordinary of prayers, profound in feeling, yet greater than human in mystery and power.... This prayer lifts time into eternity, for it is the prayer of Jesus being lifted up, drawing all men to himself and uniting them to the Father. It springs from the human heart of God." It is his paschal prayer (*Journey*, vol. 33, p. 22).

Unlike the Our Father, this prayer dwells on the period of time before the end, the eschatological times. In St. John, the last times are present now in Christ's paschal mystery. This prayer is effective because Christ is always heard; it is a promise of unity, love, and brotherhood to the Church; and it is an exhortation to us to be faithful to our calling as disciples, pray-ers, and apostles of Christian unity.

Jesus prays for himself (17:1-8), Jesus prays for the disciples at table with him (17:9-19), Jesus prays for us, and for every succeeding generation of disciples (17:20-26).

What does Teresa add to the traditional doctrine of the Church? She accepts it as a dutiful “daughter of the Church”, and she seeks for her sons and daughters to be zealous for the interior and exterior mission of the Church. The interior mission -“for if your prayers, fasts and mortifications are not for the spread of the Church and particularly for the sanctification of priests and theologians, the captains of the Church, know that you are not fulfilling the call to Carmel which God gave to you,” she says in the *Way of Perfection*.

And what does God require of those whom He leads in deepening their prayer-life in the *Intertior Castle*? “It is works, my daughters, the combination of the work and prayer of Martha and Mary, of the active and contemplative lives.” This is the goal of our prayer, the spread of the grace of the Church.

What Does This Mean for Secular Carmelites?

It seems to me that, since most of you are married couples, and all of us are members of the Carmelite community that is characterized by a family spirit, we need to realize that our families are the domestic Church, the basic unit of the mystical body of Christ. The Church is as strong as our families. And one thing that St. Teresa insisted on, which we would do well to revive today, is the spirit of care and healing the wounds of our families and the church at large. Practicality is one of the characteristics of Teresa’s doctrine. Practical devotion to the Church consists in each one of us respecting our proper places in the Church: the husband as the head of the family, the wife as the heart, and children as the beloved but obedient children of the family as Teresa was a beloved but obedient child of Holy Mother the Church. Faith in the authority of the Church was what Teresa proposed. It is the guiding light of her teaching and of that of John of the Cross.

I think that we also have an external witness to bear to the whole Church that we respect the authority of our Holy Father the Pope, our Bishop, and our properly authorized priests and ministers. Proper subordination to the authority of the Church, in a caring, cherishing, curing community will go a long way toward healing the divisions of the Church today.

Cardinal Newman said that the layman and woman have always been the measure of the vitality of the Church; as secular Carmelites, you can possibly do more to provide unity in our local churches. Especially give an example of *brotherhood*. “If your brother has anything against you, go to him and point out his fault, but keep it between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Mt. 18:15). The brotherhood of Christians can be, as in the time of Christ, the single greatest evidence of the love of God in our communities.

What Would Teresa Do If She Were a Carmelite Today?

I have often asked myself that question. My answers are only my personal opinions, but I give them to you as thought-starters:

1. I think she would see that the people of God in the United States had a thoroughly American spirituality, as she developed a spirituality proper to the Hispanic culture of her times, practical and mystical, prayerful and active, humble and yet tenaciously true to her Carmelite identity.
2. I think she would be thoroughly interested in the mission of the Order in the Church today. Father General has written the friars a pastoral letter in this vein. I believe that the cure for atheism is contemplation, deep, practical and thoroughly applied to the whole human race. The reality of God is caught, not taught, and by men and women who live His life, not by those who mouth His words. Teresa put it: "teach more by works than by words." Let us follow her lead. Point to the reality of the living God; unveil His presence to our waiting world by lives full of love and friendship; and such lives are only lived by a deep spirit of union with the Father.
3. Act as good shepherds of your own domestic churches, and aid in the shepherding function of the local churches where you belong. That means to care about our people; to cure our people of their sicknesses, spiritual and physical; to cherish our people, many of whom need special kinds of cherishing, particularly in your own families.

And protect your people. So many lies are rampant today, so many divisions, which are lies lived out; so much rancor and opposition and accusation of the brothers. The father of lies and the accuser of the brothers is having a field day. Protect our people from these insidious traps and occasions of spiritual damage.

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Discussion points for Devotion to the Church: the Discalced Carmelite's Mission

What were Teresa's dying words?

What is the understanding of the church presented in Lumen Gentium?

What is the role of the Spirit before Jesus' death and resurrection?

What is the Spirit's role today?

What is the interior mission of the Church?

According to Teresa's writing in the Interior Castle, what does God require of these He leads into deeper prayer lives?

Why is faith in the authority of the church the "guiding light of Teresa's teaching and that of John of the Cross"?

Give some examples of Teresa's practicality.

Why is it more important to teach by works than by words? How does this apply to our prayer lives?